



HAL
open science

Book Reviews: Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature.

Allan Ingram

► **To cite this version:**

Allan Ingram. Book Reviews: Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature.. History of Psychiatry, 2006, 17 (2), pp.245-246. 10.1177/0957154X0601700212 . hal-00570836

HAL Id: hal-00570836

<https://hal.science/hal-00570836>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

women during the Enlightenment, and essays on popular dream books written for Victorian women and Russian peasants, and what they reveal about their respective audiences. The art historian Stefanie Heraeus argues against her readers' supposed 'fixation' on Freud as the first to describe the unconscious mind, and surrealist artists as the first to depict dreams, by pointing to the many artistic precursors in nineteenth-century France. She focuses on the charming, whimsical dream images by the illustrator Jean-Jacques Granville, and the darker visions of the theatre of the night presented by Victor Hugo and Odilon Redon. Nine fascinating dream images by these artists and others accompany this essay. The historian of medicine Jennifer Ford discusses the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's interest in dreams and other nocturnal psychic phenomena in terms of early nineteenth-century medical models of the mind. A revelatory dream by an American historian of Assyria is also set in its context – late-nineteenth-century Protestantism – by the historian of psychiatry Rhodri Hayward. Threads linking these diverse historical topics include authors' frequent comments on the need to understand accounts of dreams in a broad cultural context because of the fluid boundaries between reality, illusion, natural and supernatural, and changing perspectives on the human mind.

The birth of psychoanalysis is described by the analyst and historian Ilse Grubrich-Simitis in her account of Freud's writing of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and his revisions of this founding text for each of its editions, manifesting his life-long struggle to establish psychoanalysis as a science. After a discussion of the outlook on dreams of an analysand of Freud, the botanist Sir Arthur Tansey, the collection of essays ends on the topic of the changing use of dreams in the psychoanalytic hour, with an interview with Hanna Segal, a case history by analyst Edna O'Shaunessy, and a survey of recent trends by sociologist Susan Budd.

Any attempt at an overview of this vast topic invites the reader to note omissions. This reviewer felt the absence of any discussion of Freud's original goal of creating not only a psychology but also a physiology of the dreaming mind, and the widespread attempt within neuroscience today to fulfil Freud's objective by integrating the fruits of a century of psychoanalysis with current research on the neurology and evolutionary biology of the mind.

LYNN GAMWELL
Binghamton University Art Museum

Allen Thiher. **Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature.**
Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004. Pp. 354. ISBN 0-472-08999-4 (pbk).

This is a welcome publication. Allen Thiher's book, first published in 1999, is now available, with all its faults, in paperback, and remains required reading for anyone interested in the relations between insanity, culture and

society in Western Europe. The boldness of its intentions remains, alone among specialist writing on madness and culture, its sweep is immense, the choice of detail considered and telling, and the knowledge of primary sources impressive and systematic. I am aware of no comparable text, particularly when the shrewdness of much of Thiher's analysis is taken into account. No one could read this book and come away without having gained insights into the development of Western civilization.

To speak first of its faults: it is selective, not so much in the topics chosen for discussion, which are core to any such undertaking, but in the figures who receive attention. We look in vain for many of the most challenging writers of the insanity canon. Of the British, with which I am most familiar, Smart, Cowper, Blake, Wordsworth, Dickens, Browning, Eliot and Yeats, to name only a few, all had important engagements with madness, and specialists of other literatures will doubtless identify similar omissions. Writing by the mad is also overlooked (I am thinking of major accounts of personal experience by, for example, John Perceval from the early nineteenth century), and the selection of medical men is as partial as that of the literary ones. Engagement with secondary literature is virtually absent, in spite of some early positioning with regard to Foucault, and reference to contemporary critical writing about madness and culture is sparse. The style can be irritating, with Paracelsus described as 'wacky' twice within a few pages ('wacky free thinking', p. 59, and 'Writing a wackily pretentious mixture of German and Latin', p. 61), and I lost count of the number of times that Thiher 'wants' to do and especially 'hopes' to do things on pages 2–3. Finally, there are mistakes that really should have been corrected, most notably concerning the historian Stanley Jackson, cited correctly in the notes (p. 326), but given as 'Johnson' in both the text (p. 20) and the index (p. 344).

This remains, however, a strong book. Its first part, 'Madness from Hippocrates to Hölderlin', might sound over-general, but the grasp of detail is so firm and the direction so controlled that the result is far from a shallow survey, particularly with the inclusion of topics and chapters such as 'The Iatro-Mechanical Era and the Madness of Machines', a sophisticated and effective way into the period of Descartes and the Enlightenment. The second part, 'The Modernity of Madness', is a concentrated analysis of how we arrived at where we are now, not least in terms of what are identified as the two dominant 'medical discourses, psycho-analysis and psychiatry' (p. 164). Medical understanding and cultural expression are richly intertwined here, and the selective mix of writers from different Western cultures, while indeed selective, nevertheless provides an illuminating counterpoint to the emphases of medicine and psychiatry. Such strengths more than outweigh the faults that are, in many respects, inevitably attendant upon the ambitious scope of the undertaking. Opinionated and stimulating, the book is essential reading.

ALLAN INGRAM
University of Northumbria at Newcastle